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An Act of Stono

Twenty slaves in the midst of rebellion enter and raid a firearms store, then attack the white citizens of Rantowels, South Carolina. They rampage through the town, killing every slave-owning white man, woman, or child in sight. This horrible act cannot possibly be carried out in a real- life situation, right? Wrong. These are the events of the Stono Rebellion of 1739, which started in the town of Rantowels. In 1739, such acts of resistance by slaves were unheard of, so the white plantation owners left themselves venerable. This and other rebellions of the early 1700’s taught the white settlers in America not to trust the black people. The Stono Rebellion itself was important because it caused the South Carolina Colonial Assembly to pass new laws restricting the lives of slaves in their state.

Many different theories exist as to why the Stono Rebellion took place. One such theory is that the slaves had the idea to revolt for a while before the rebellion actually took place, but armed men were around them on every day, including the Sabbath (Sunday). This was true until the South Carolina Colonial Assembly passed the Security Act of 1739. This required all white men to carry their firearms to church on Sundays. This led the leaders of the rebellion to believe that the best chance of a successful rebellion and escape was on a Sunday, as the white males with guns would all be in church. The ultimate goal of the rebellion was to escape to Florida, because the Spanish king issued a decree granting freedom to slaves escaping to Florida. So, the stage was set.

The Stono Rebellion began on Sunday, September 9th, 1739 in the town of Rantowles, South Carolina, a mere twelve miles west of Charleston. An Angolan Slave named Jemmy was the leader of the revolt. Approximately twenty rebel slaves raided a firearms store, armed themselves, and killed the two white shopkeepers. The band then marched to the house of the Godfrey family (who were just plantation owners), killed all of the family, including his wife, son, and daughter, and burned his house down. They marched south, spelling to any slave- owning white families. They spared one white because he was kind to slaves, one white family was hidden by their slaves, and only one escaped the rebels of his own accord- Lieutenant Governor William Bull, who then contacted the militia. The slaves had killed 21 white people- men, women, and children- and they had a group 50 renegades strong. The weary rebels rested in a field for a while, and that is where they made their mistake. Lieutenant Governor Bull had contacted the militia find the rampaging slaves, and they eventually found them in that field. After a short firefight, 44 fugitives lay dead and the rest had escaped. Most were captured over the next month and executed, all except one runaway, who managed to elude capture for three years. However, the ordeal was not over.

The white settlers of South Carolina did not take lightly to this rebellion. They had had a law on hold in their Colonial Assembly for a while before the rebellion which would restrict the lives of slaves. After the Stono Rebellion, they hastened to pass the bill. Thus, the Negro Act of 1740 was created in response. This act prohibited slaves from growing their own food, assembling in groups, earning money that they, not their master, retained, and learning to read. The Assembly also enacted a new law requiring a ratio of one white person for every ten Negro slaves on a plantation, thus restricting the freedom of African American slaves even more. Although Jemmy and the rest of the rebels involved in the Stono Rebellion thought they were helping the Negro cost, they may have hurt it in the long run.

The Stono Rebellion caused a major stir in South Carolina at the time. It caused the South Carolina Colonial Assembly to restrict the lives of slaves in their state, thereby increasing slave resentment. However, what if this had not happened? The outcome may not seem drastic to some, but to African slaves, this rebellion may have cost them the little freedom they had at the time. The Negro Act of 1740 was hastily passed in response to the Stono Rebellion, but it had been on hold at the South Carolina Colonial Assembly for quite some time. If the Stono Rebellion had not happened, South Carolinian slaves’ lives would be much less restricted, and who knows how many of them would have obtained some kind of revolutionary idea while working for other people? Perhaps some slaves who resented their owners for restricting their lives would no longer feel that way had the Negro Act not been passed. Well, that is one thing about history: once it has happened, there is no changing it.

The Stono Rebellion was an important event in our history for a number of reasons, but the most important was that it and other early rebellions by slaves lost any trust white plantation owners had in their slaves, and they restricted slaves lives even more. This situation in particular showed the United States’ settlers how important it is to keep control of their slaves and make sure they do not put other white people in danger. This also showed that slaves could be a threat, and that America may not be able to effectively halt all thoughts of rebellion- a point the north would use when attempting toabolish slavery 100 years later. The Stono Rebellion was a failure when looked at literally, but sometimes failures can have major impacts on a society and people.